



Celebrating 50 Years of Title IX

50 For 50:

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I think girls walk away with a renewed sense of confidence and understanding that, 'If it is to be, it's up to me,' and I can make a difference just as easily as anyone else.



By Harold Bechard

Cheryl Gleason has been a part of the Kansas Association for Youth (KAY) for a half-century as a student camper, camp staffer and, for the last three-plus decades, the state director.

Gleason's passion and enthusiasm for the KAY program has never wavered. Her commitment is as strong as ever as she enters her final few weeks working for the Kansas State High School Activities Association.

Gleason officially retired from the KSHSAA on July 1 as an assistant executive director, but will work through Oct. 1 to help her replacement, Annie Diederich, with the transition. Diederich will take control of KAY as its state director, but Gleason will be at Rock Springs 4-H

Center later this month for the 2021 Leadership Camp, July 26-30.

A total of 158 campers and 32 staff members are set to attend the week-long camp south of Junction City. Gleason will be there to greet each one like they are one of her own.

"On a personal level, Cheryl makes every person - whether a camp staff member or camper - feel like family," said Jenny White, who has been a staff member for 31 of the last 32 camps. "She will call those 158 kids by their first name. She'll get to know them on a level that will just make their day."



KAY Staff dedicated a tree at Rock Springs in Cheryl and Wanda May Vinson's name.

The Leadership Camp is just one aspect of KAY, a character-building, leadership-training, service program directed by the Activities Association. KAY is a student association unique to Kansas. The KSHSAA offers this activity to Kansas students, through its member schools as a means to "make a world of difference" for current and future generations.

This year, KAY is celebrating its 75th year. Founded in 1946, its roots stem from a civics classroom at Wichita East High School a couple years earlier. It started with Wanda May Vinson, the school's civics teacher at the time, talking to students about the importance of being responsible young citizens for other people.

"The students got excited and told the teacher, wouldn't it be cool if we could have a club all of us here could join?" Gleason said.

Vinson, who passed away in 2004 and is a member of the KSHSAA Hall of Fame, took the idea to the KSHSAA, which, ironically at that time, was discussing topics that went beyond athletics that would educate the total student and teach them a level of responsibility and civic engagement.

The KSHSAA adopted the idea and the rest, as they say, is history.

Want to learn more? Get the facts about [KAY here](#).

"We tell students today, 75 years later, not only is the program for you, but by you; that your predecessors put everything in place," Gleason said. "They decided the pledge, the motto, the slogan, the privileges, the colors, everything about this organization."

"They even decided the name out of a big list of names. It's been student-driven since day one."

There's no postseason for KAY as in athletics, but the program provides three major organized events each year - the annual Leadership Camp each summer at Rock Springs; six day-long Regional Conferences each fall and 12 half-day Unit Conferences held across the state in January and February.

When she attended the leadership camp in 1970 prior to her junior year at Columbus High School, Gleason said there were 943 girls who attended two week-long camps at Rock Springs. That was the height of KAY's popularity. Eighteen years later, boys were allowed to attend the summer camps.



KAY staff at summer camp!

The number of campers and staff members has stayed around 300 over the last several years, with about 75-80 percent of the campers being girls and around 20-25 percent being boys. Because of Covid restrictions, this summer's camp will welcome 158 campers and 32 staff members.

One of those staffers will be Jenny White of Hilton, Okla., who graduated from South Barber High School (Kiowa) in 1990. A former KAY camper of her own, White will be attending her 31st summer camp this month. The only one she missed was in 2007 when she delivered her first

son six weeks prior to the camp and was not medically released to attend that summer.

"There was no air conditioning back then," Jenny said.

White was one of five rookie staff members chosen by Gleason to work the 1990 leadership camp in Gleason's first year as the KAY director.

"Julia, Jennifer, Jenny, Amy and Angie," said White, naming the five rookies in an instant - Julia (Tibbetts) Werthmann from Lansing, Jennifer (Shaw) Luis from Arkansas City, Jenny (Wilson) White from Kiowa, Amy (Pray) Schoon from Mulvane and Angie (Potts) Johnston from McPherson.

"We became the rookie's rookies because it was Cheryl's rookie year of being the director and we were the rookies at camp, as well," White said. "After 32 years, I'm the lone rookie of

those rookies left on the camp staff."

White said the friendships she's gained over the last three decades serving on the camp staff has been special.

"I just never would have met these people otherwise," she said. "The fact we share the same common goals of service and leadership means a great deal."

White said she tries to instill those same KAY values she learned as a young lady into her two sons - ages 14 and 11 - who are involved in service organizations themselves.

White is also involved in community service in her current hometown. She was recently named the 2020 Citizen of the Year for Hilton, Oklahoma.

"I was in tears; I didn't know it was happening," she said. "A state representative came to town and did a proclamation of the award. She got to the portion of me being involved with the Kansas Association for Youth for 32 years. She stopped and said, 'I need to hear more about this.'"

"So, the impact (KAY) is outside the borders of Kansas; we just don't realize how much of an impact there really is."

Approximately half the KSHSAA-member high schools have KAY programs. In the 1940s, '50s, '60s and '70s, schools had separate clubs for boys and girls. Boys were part of the Kay Club and girls the Kayette Club. In 1988, the clubs came under one name - KAY - and boys started attending the summer leadership camps.

Two years later, Gleason was named the KAY state director as part of her job as a KSHSAA assistant executive director. She followed in the footsteps of her mentor, Wanda May Vinson, who headed the KAY organization for 36 years. A scholarship in Vinson's honor has is presented to KAY student leaders each year.

"I grew up in a family where you did things for people because that's just what you did," she said. "You baked cookies for people; you went over and visited senior citizens. You did those things. So, when I went to high school my freshman year, I went to a meeting for the Kayette program, I thought, 'Oh my God, this is me, this is what I do, so I absolutely loved it."



Wanda May Vinson founded the KAY Program.

"So, for me - and this is my 50th year of being on the staff - we get to teach kids what we

think is important, and that is leadership and service, and not just being a neighbor, but being neighborly, and doing all the things we wish everyone would do."

Gleason said the favorite part of her week at Leadership Camp is the last day or two, not because she wants to see the girls and boys go home, but to see the difference in confidence and assuredness from the first day to the last.

"What I like about the last day is, I love to look at the kids and see the difference that our experiences have had for them," Gleason said. "It's all about the opportunities for them to just get to know themselves, to discover themselves, to see they matter, to see it's ok to think outside the box; that women can step forward and lead, just as easily as men can."

"I think girls walk away with a renewed sense of confidence and understanding that, 'If it is to be, it's up to me,' and I can make a difference just as easily as anyone else. This program means the world to me and will always mean the world to me."



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